



Pitts, F. H. (2016). Talking on the clock: Bristol's 'new factories'. *Bristol Cable*.

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<https://thebristolcable.org/2016/01/talking-on-the-clock-brisbols-new-factories/>

The citation for the published article is as follows: Pitts, F. H., 2016. Talking on the clock: Bristol's 'new factories'. *Bristol Cable* no. 6, 19th January 2016.

Talking on the clock: Bristol's 'new factories'

F. H. Pitts – 19th January 2016

Bristol's business quarter, at 5.30pm on a weekday: throngs of smart-casual twentys-omethings exit glass foyers. Within these shiny exteriors lurk factory floors. Workers hunch at desks crammed row upon row. Keyboards clack, handsets click. Computers clock every call and time toilet breaks. Screens show minutes passing and the targets set and met. Welcome to Bristol's call centres.

Two to three per cent of South West employees work in call centres. Bristol represents a large swathe of this sector. Call centres form a significant part of some of our city's biggest firms' business: outbound contact centres like Teleperformance; insurance companies such as Aviva and Direct Line; finance firms like HSBC; charity fundraisers like HOME and NTT; utilities suppliers like OVO Energy. Most companies employ between 500 and 1000 people.

Falling by the wayside

Turnover is rapid. According to one employee, the average stay at her company is six months to a year, with new starters arriving every day. The rate at which employees wear out owes partly to the difficulty of succeeding in the target-based culture. An employee at a Bristol insurance company describes how breaks are "measured to the second". Dawdlers are disciplined. Off the toilet, workers face constant targets set in reference to the number and length of their calls.

Certain targets promise commission or bonuses upon attainment, but they're often cryptic or unobtainable. Some seem made up on the spot. For instance, mentioning the day of the week or the weather when talking to a customer.

"Some targets seem made up on the spot; for instance mentioning the day of the week, or the weather, when talking to a customer."

At another firm, the bonus depends on measuring criteria such as 'values' and 'personality'. Without a clear framework for translating these concepts into ratings, the scoring boils down to a contest as to who can curry most favour with their superiors.

Many fall by the wayside, but the high turnover also arises from workers seeking greener pastures. They follow friends or pursue better pay, better perks and better hours.

Bristol seems to attract restless, educated young people wanting quick, easy ways to fund their dreams. Employers compete over this constant stream of new labour. "They actually want you to want to work for them," one worker tells me.

Firms seek employer awards; some are happy to give workers a decent payoff to smooth out any ill-will post-sacking. This search for 'top employer' status induces companies to offer generous pay and decent hours. One energy firm pays overtime at time-and-a-half whenever the employee needs it and employees receive free massages on company time. These perks arise not through collective worker demands, but as company recruitment incentives.

One large bank offers rotational shifts that 'tie into life', a trade unionist explains, but seemingly generous shift patterns can result in contrary outcomes. Without worker power, "it doesn't matter what the contract says". An employee at an insurance firm explains how, despite a fixed-hours contract and job security, his shifts change each week.

Elsewhere, benefits have been won through worker-led campaigns. Many finance firms inherit trade union agreements from their branch-banking pasts, with old-fashioned fixed hours and pay at above minimum wage.

What of worker organisation?

But new or specialist call centres tend not to have this more traditional structure. Even with formal agreements, conditions limit the ability of workers to hold employers to account. On an everyday level, workers are incentivised to spend every minute on the phone, leaving few opportunities for sharing problems with colleagues during the work day.

The 'high turnover, low commitment' nature of the work curbs mobilisation for changes and improvements. With no sense of loyalty and a competitive target-based working environment, young workers are less likely to join unions.

But activists might take solace in the similarity between call centres and traditional hotbeds of workplace resistance. Call centres are the "new factories", one trade unionist told me. He cites some similarities: unskilled work, shop-floor settings, and large concentrations of people. And these factory-like characteristics may enable rather than deter resistance.

Call centre work is becoming increasingly similar to a production line. As one employee explained, in finance and insurance, the experience of work has changed with recent legislation. The 2012 Financial Services Act introduced strict regulation policing how finance firms deal with consumers. As a result, customer interaction is broken-down, scripted, monitored and measured more closely. The customer relationship is processed like a car at an assembly plant.

But in these new factories the old struggles are also the same: time, pay and the pace of work. Could the same tactics used in production line jobs work in call centres too? Should call centre workers plug into the industrial history of goslows, worktorule, strikes and sabotage? There may be no need to rewrite the rulebook. Well-worn industrial tactics may still fit the bill after all, from old factories to new